



I

INTRODUCTION TO DANIEL: GOD RULES

(DANIEL 1:1-2)

Setting in context

Daniel is a complex book and getting our bearings at the start is important. An introductory study can be helpful in providing some basic navigation tools and in getting across the message of the book. The opening two verses of chapter 1 provide an appropriate text for such an introductory study. The verses are included here for ease of reference.

1. 'In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.
2. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.'

It would, of course, be perfectly appropriate to take these verses as the introduction to a study on the whole of Daniel 1 (which is the approach taken in the next chapter).



(1) *Dating*

The opening verse marks the beginning of the Exile. The 'third year of the reign of Jehoiakim' is 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar became king of Babylon in the same year (he reigned from 605–562 B.C.). This is the first show of strength by Nebuchadnezzar, and marked the beginning of the process that led to the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. and the mass deportation of God's people into exile in Babylon.

While the events described in chapter 1 focus on the three-year training programme Daniel and his friends underwent in Babylon, the closing verse of the chapter provides an historical marker, denoting the fall of the Babylonian dynasty to the Medo-Persian kingdom under Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. The 'first year of King Cyrus' (v. 21) is 539 B.C. and marked the end of the Exile.

(2) *Context – structure of book*

The book of Daniel is an historical account of the Exile. The first half of the book (Chs. 1–6) records a number of significant events that took place during the Exile. These events, which span the entire period of the Exile, focus both on God's dealings with His people and with the pagan kings of Babylon and Medo-Persia. The second half of the book (Chs. 7–12) records a number of prophetic visions Daniel received during the Exile (the final prophetic vision (Chs. 10–12) was just after the Exile ended). The prophetic visions point to a future when God's people will often be oppressed. But they also point to a glorious future, when God will establish His everlasting Kingdom with an all-powerful King, where one day God's people will reign with Him.



The opening verses of chapter 1 are an appropriate preface, both to the historical account that follows, and to the future orientation of the book.

(3) *Context – message of book*

The key message of the book is that *God rules and is building an everlasting Kingdom*. To God's people living in the world, it may not look or feel like it, but the fact is God rules. This message is particularly important in times of oppression for the people of God.

God calls His people to live distinctively in light of His rule. This is a key way God reveals His presence in the world of Babylon and advances His Kingdom. Living distinctively invariably results in conflict and oppression. God's people can also experience oppression as a direct consequence of their sinful disobedience. The Exile is a direct result of their sin and lack of distinctiveness. This is the outworking of God's covenant with His people. The covenant, with its guarantee of future blessing but also curses for disobedience, is key to understanding the Exile and to how God deals with His people throughout history.

Working on the text

Consistent with the structure and message of the book as a whole, these opening verses touch on some key themes. The following points can be identified.

- (1) In spite of what it looks like and feels like God rules
- (2) God's people experience oppression in the world of Babylon
- (3) God's presence is inescapable, challenging other beliefs and worldviews



(1) *In spite of what it looks like and feels like God rules*

Verse 1 is a straightforward historical statement such as might appear in a chronicle of events. History records the might of the Babylonian kingdom under the powerful king Nebuchadnezzar overpowering the weak king, Jehoiakim, the city of Jerusalem and the people of Judah. The language conveys a sense of dominance and subjugation – Nebuchadnezzar ‘came’, ‘besieged’, ‘carried off’, ‘put’. It looked like the power was with Nebuchadnezzar. And it would have felt like it for those who lived through it. Even though the final destruction of the city and the temple is still nearly twenty years in the future, the signs are ominous. This is a defiant challenge to God’s promises about the covenant, the Davidic kingdom and the security of Jerusalem.

If verse 1 is an historical record of what happened, verse 2 is a theological explanation of what is really going on. Whatever may have been the secondary causes of the downfall of Jerusalem, such as the incompetence of their later kings or the powerful new Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, ultimately it was an act of God Himself. God is in control. He gives His people into exile. He gives the articles from His temple to be taken to the temple of Nebuchadnezzar’s god in Babylon. The verb ‘gave’ (v. 2) (NIV ‘delivered’) is to be an important one in the theology of the book. All power is given by God – the great kingdoms and kings of this world, their power given and taken by God, something that even Nebuchadnezzar comes to recognise in the end (4:34-35).

Thus, in spite of what it looks like, the Exile is not an event that disrupts God’s plans. Rather, it is part of God’s plan. Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Cyrus are

all pawns on God's chessboard. What is God's plan? All these events are part of God's purpose to establish His everlasting Kingdom. In contrast to earthly kingdoms and kings which come and go (like the Babylonian kingdom and its kings) God will establish an everlasting Kingdom, with all power, authority and dominion given to God's anointed King. This is the main theme of the book, the dominant note sounded in every chapter. In the introductory segment 'Getting our Bearings' the section on the message of Daniel summarises how this theme is developed through the book. In this introductory study it might be helpful to give such an overview.

(2) *God's people experience oppression
in the world of Babylon*

The book of Daniel could be described as 'A Tale of Two Cities' – Jerusalem, the city of God, and Babylon, the city of the world. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, attacks Jerusalem, and the people of God are taken from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon. Both are literal cities, capitals of their respective kingdoms, but both also stand for the abiding reality of God's people ('Jerusalem') living in a godless world ('Babylon'). In that regard, it is instructive to reflect on how the two names are used in Scripture.

Jerusalem (earlier Salem), first comes to prominence in Genesis 14 where Abraham meets its king, Melchizedek. Melchizedek is described as 'priest of God Most High' (Gen. 14:18). Already, therefore, Jerusalem is the place associated with the worship of the one true God. Much later Jerusalem is captured by David from the Jebusites (2 Sam. 5:6-15) and the Ark of the Covenant taken there (2 Sam. 6; Ps. 24). In the Psalms, the preferred name for

Jerusalem is Zion, a reference to Mount Zion, the hill on which the city stood. Yet Jerusalem is far more than a literal city. It is the people of God throughout history who gather on Mount Zion, the city of the living God (Heb. 12:22).

Babylon also first appears in Genesis 10 where it is associated with the sinister figure of Nimrod and the early Mesopotamian city states in Shinar (Gen. 10:9-12). While from the beginning of the Bible Jerusalem is associated with the worship of God, Babylon is associated with a warlord and pride in human achievement, which culminates in the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). Later, the history of the region is marked by power struggles between Babylon in the south and Assyria in the north. As the book of Daniel begins, a long period of the supremacy of Assyria has come to an end with the fall of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital in 612 B.C. And now in 605 B.C., Babylon's vigorous new King, Nebuchadnezzar, had brought the city to the peak of its power. Yet like Jerusalem, Babylon is far more than a literal city. It is a symbol of the anti-God forces in history which battle with Zion (see e.g. Isa. 13-14 and Jer. 50-51). The language of 'Babylon' is used in the New Testament to make the same point. In his first letter Peter comments: 'She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings' (1 Pet. 5:13). Almost certainly Peter is referring to the Church ('she') in Rome ('Babylon'). The message of 1 Peter is that God's people are elect exiles (1 Pet. 1:1-2) called to live distinctively in the world (1 Pet. 2:11-12). In this world, they will experience suffering (1 Pet. 1:6-9) but there is a guaranteed glorious inheritance to look forward to in the future (1 Pet. 1:3-5). The final outcome of the battle is seen in Revelation 17 and 18 where Babylon is destroyed, followed by the coming



down of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21 and 22.

The clash of Jerusalem and Babylon – God’s people living in a godless world – is a major theme in Daniel. Through the experience of Daniel and his friends living in Babylon we see how difficult it is for God’s people to live distinctive lives in such an environment. They face constant pressure to conform and when they take a stand for God, opposition and persecution are inevitable. This is the focus of the conflict in chapters 1, 3 and 6. The pressure of living as God’s people in a godless world is also a major focus of the apocalyptic material in Daniel and, in particular chapters 7, 8 and 11. Chapter 7 is a grand overview of history and the weight of worldly power which often opposes the people of God. Ultimately, however, God’s power is greater, seen in the establishment of His everlasting Kingdom, which is His people’s glorious inheritance. The more detailed prophecies in chapters 8 and 11 focus on an intense period of persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. The experience of oppression is an ever-present reality for the people of God. This will be the case until the Lord Jesus returns to bring in the New Jerusalem, the full and final fulfilment of God’s everlasting Kingdom inaugurated with the first coming of Christ.

The oppression experienced by God’s people arises from their calling to live distinctively in the world. But God’s people will also experience oppression as a direct consequence of their sinful behaviour. The covenant between God and His people promises blessing for obedience but punishment for disobedience (e.g. Deut. 28). The Exile is a direct consequence of such sinful behaviour and loss of distinctiveness, warned of repeatedly in the



Prophets (e.g. Isa. 3, 5). But there is always purpose in God's punishment, to render His people distinctive again. God is totally committed to His people. They will inherit His everlasting Kingdom.

(3) *God's presence is inescapable, challenging other beliefs and worldviews*

What is the significance of the articles (vessels) from the temple that God delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's hand, which Nebuchadnezzar then put in the temple of his god in Babylon (v. 2)? These vessels will appear again in Chapter 5 where Belshazzar uses them at a drunken orgy. In Ezra we read of their return to Jerusalem where they are reinstated in the temple once it has been rebuilt (Ezra 1:7-11). In the same way that God gives His people into exile, God gives the articles into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. God is in control, all part of His plan.

The reference to Nebuchadnezzar's god is probably Marduk, head of the Babylonian pantheon. The placing of the articles from the temple of God in Jerusalem in the temple of Marduk is a deliberate and provocative statement as to the superiority of Marduk (and by association, Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar). In his recent book on Daniel, *Against the Tide*, John Lennox makes the insightful point that Nebuchadnezzar's actions are an attempt to relativize the absolute. The articles from the temple in Jerusalem representing the one true and living God are showcased along with the many gods of Babylon. When it came to gods the Babylonian worldview was relativism.

Such an arrogant challenge to God's authority raises the stakes. There are parallels with the incident in 1 Samuel 5 where the Philistines, having captured the Ark of the



Covenant at the battle of Ebenezer, place it in front of their god, Dagon, in his temple. When the people of Ashdod return to the temple, they find the statue of their god, Dagon, 'fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD' (1 Sam. 5:3-4). And, of course, in Babylon, when Belshazzar and his revellers use the temple vessels in his drunken party, God dramatically intervenes and both Belshazzar and the Babylonian kingdom fall.

In many ways the whole episode in 1 Samuel 4 and 5 foreshadows the Exile. God's people had attempted to use the Ark as a magical talisman to avoid defeat. The ark could not defend them and they were overpowered by the Philistines because of their idolatry and unbelief. Yet when the Philistines blasphemously desecrate the Ark before Dagon, God intervenes to demonstrate His rule and authority.

Earlier in biblical history, the events of the Exodus are a battle between God and the gods of Egypt. This is crystallised in Exodus 12:12 where God says: '...I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD (Yahweh).' This is an emphatic answer to Pharaoh's question in Exodus 5:2: 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?'

There are also relevant passages in the Prophets. Particularly striking is Isaiah 46:

'Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are borne by beasts
of burden.

The images that are carried about are
burdensome,
a burden for the weary.



They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity'
(Isa. 46:1-2).

Bel (or Lord) is Marduk, the chief Babylonian god, and Nebo, his son, the Babylonian god of wisdom. The reference is to the carrying of the images of these gods, along the Ishtar Way in Babylon to the temple of Marduk. Isaiah's point is to question what kind of 'gods' these really are which need to be carried? God, as Isaiah has already told us, is the one who carries us, His people (Isa. 40:11). Ultimately these false gods are just a heavy burden and will themselves be taken into captivity. This is probably a reference to the overthrow of the Babylonian kingdom, but ultimately the subjugation of all human power and wisdom to the sovereignty and power of God's everlasting rule.

Standing back from the detail of the text, the placing of the articles from the temple in Jerusalem in the temple in Babylon symbolise the presence of God in Babylon, challenging its beliefs and worldviews and building God's Kingdom. Through the book of Daniel, God's presence in the world of Babylon is seen in a number of different ways. We see it, for example, in His control of events, both the big picture (His control of the Exile) and in the detail. A number of details in chapter 1 illustrate. God influences Ashpenaz to show favour to Daniel. God gives Daniel and his friends good health and exceptional ability. All of this is with the intention of putting them into the heart of Babylon that God might build His Kingdom. God's control is also seen in His miraculous intervention, most evidently in the dramatic deliverance from the furnace (Ch. 3) and lions' den (Ch. 6). God's presence is

also seen as He breaks into the world of Babylon with divine revelation, for example Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in chapters 2 and 4, and the writing on the wall in chapter 5. Although Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar do not understand what they have seen they are conscious of a higher authority and gripped by mortal fear. Understanding comes only when God gives the interpretation to Daniel. The collective wisdom of Babylon cannot shed any light on such ultimate realities. True knowledge and understanding only come when God breaks into our world bringing revelation. Again, this is a rich biblical theme, that finds its fulfilment in the revelation of God through Jesus Christ who came into the world to make God known (John 1:18). The content of the prophecies throughout the book reveal that God rules in the world (e.g. Chs. 2, 7, 12).

The presence of God in Babylon is also manifest through the distinctiveness of God's people. Nebuchadnezzar's strategy was to take the future leaders of God's people into Babylon and to put God out of their lives. Instead, Daniel and his friends lived distinctively in light of God's rule with the result that God put them into the heart of Babylon as His witnesses.

From text to message

(1) *Get the message clear*

i) *Big idea*

In spite of appearances, God rules and is building His Kingdom.

ii) *Key questions*

Preaching or teaching on this passage should answer the following questions:

- Who is in control of history?
- What is God's overarching plan for the world and His people?
- Why is oppression so often the experience of God's people?
- In particularly stressful times, why can God's people trust Him?
- In what ways is God's presence seen in the world?

(2) *Engage the hearer*

i) *Point of contact*

In his poem *The Second Coming*, Yeats wrote: 'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' This is how the people of Judah must have felt as the events of the Exile began to unfold.

Or the following from the experience of one of the authors: 'A number of years ago, my wife and I were on holiday in Keswick during one of the convention weeks. Between the meetings, we would spend our afternoons in the hills. The town of Keswick sits at the end of Derwent water, the lake surrounded by hills, forming a natural amphitheatre. On one particular afternoon, as part of the convention, the BBC were recording Songs of Praise in the open air at the edge of the lake. Although we must have been three or four miles away at the opposite end of the lake from the town, we could hear the singing clearly, echoed by the natural amphitheatre of the hills. The hymn being sung was *To God be the Glory* with the chorus:

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord!
let the earth hear His voice;*



*praise the Lord, praise the Lord!
let the people rejoice:
O come to the Father,
through Jesus the Son
and give Him the glory;
great things He hath done!*

That day, in the splendour of God's creation, the earth heard the Lord's song. No one could escape it. No one could shut it out.' Inspiring as that was it is not a realistic picture of what it's like to live as God's people in the world. More often we find ourselves echoing the words of the Psalmist:

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:4)*

The book of Daniel is a timeless message of encouragement and challenge to the people of God that answers, precisely, that question.

ii) Dominant pictures / illustrations

Pictures or illustrations that contrast the appearance of power with reality are helpful. For example, you could illustrate the power of Babylon in the Ancient World by showing a picture of the Ishtar Gate, the entrance to the Ancient City of Babylon. The gate has been reconstructed brick by brick in a museum in Berlin. Built both to impress and intimidate, the Ishtar Gate is an awesome sight (even in a museum), not only its sheer scale, but the striking blue and gold stonework with reliefs of bulls and dragons, the guardians of the gate and the city of Babylon. As you show a picture of this symbol of power you make the point that in spite of appearances God is in control. And of course, the Ishtar Gate is now a museum artefact, whereas God's



Kingdom endures. This pattern is repeated throughout history.

A more contemporary picture or illustration would be the Church today. In the Western world the powers of secularism dominate, the people of God feeling increasingly marginalised. Again that can be illustrated in a number of ways – both from a big-picture perspective, and the day to day reality of life.

(3) *Work on application*

- In spite of what it looks like and feels like God rules. This is a timeless principle of application. From our vantage point in salvation history we can look back and see how God has established His everlasting Kingdom with Jesus as His all-powerful King. Yet the Kingdom of God has not yet come in all its fullness. That will happen when Jesus returns. Until then, it will look like human power dominates. But God rules.
- Even when it looks like God has experienced a significant set-back He hasn't. Throughout history, again and again it seems God is on the back foot, His cause thwarted. But we should not be fooled. God's Kingdom is always going forward, His cause always advancing. Indeed, significant set-backs are often the catalyst for significant advance. This principle can be applied at a big-picture global level (e.g. the expulsion of missionaries from China in the 1950s that led to the growth of the indigenous Chinese Church) but also with respect to our local situations where set-backs in church life are used